We have heard all about the economics and political implications of Brexit, but what can sociology add to our understanding of this crucial issue? Martin Holborn investigates.

The UK voted in a referendum in favour of leaving the European Union (EU) on 23 June 2016, and the country is due to leave around a year from now, on 29 March 2019. Victor J. Seidler has recently published the first full-length book by a sociologist on the subject. In *Making Sense of Brexit* (2018) he offers insights into the reasons behind the referendum result — a result which took many social scientists by surprise.

Who voted for Brexit?

Seidler points out that opinion-poll research and constituency-level information on the result suggests that the 'Leave' vote was concentrated among older voters, particularly in England, those outside the big cities and in regions other than the southeast.

A very high proportion of people voted 'Leave' in declining former industrial areas such as the northeast. 'Leave' votes also did very well in the east of England, where there are high levels of immigration from eastern Europe.

These patterns, and the emphasis in the 'Leave' campaign on 'taking control of our borders' and cutting immigration, have led some to suggest that racism and xenophobia (prejudice against 'foreigners') was behind the vote. Seidler does not deny that these were factors,
but he argues that they alone cannot explain Brexit and that deep-seated social changes were of crucial importance.

**Neoliberalism and globalisation**

In recent decades, globalisation — the process by which the world becomes more integrated and national borders lose significance — has gone hand-in-hand with neoliberalism, in which there is greater acceptance of free-market economics. According to Seidler, some social groups and regions have benefited more than others from these changes, and it is these areas which tended to have the strongest ‘Remain’ vote. Cosmopolitan, metropolitan areas such as London, in which there is a diverse population and a relatively booming economy, have been most likely to feel that they have gained from globalisation and neoliberalism. They have developed multicultural communities with international and global links. The population of these areas is relatively mobile — many have experienced the benefit of moving to places in search of greater opportunities.

**Anger and frustration**

However, in former industrial areas, few people see globalisation and neoliberalism in a favourable light. Older industries have declined in the face of competition from low-wage economies around the world. Real wages have stagnated or declined. Immigrants from eastern European countries have been seen as competing for manual jobs, and many believe that they have driven down wage levels.

Furthermore, many in the traditional working class feel that their culture has been undermined and devalued. They believe that the so-called ‘metropolitan elite’ look down on their patriotism and on their desire to maintain a local, working-class identity. They didn’t feel that they were given a say when the EU was expanded to the east, allowing workers from relatively low-wage countries to come to the UK.

For these reasons, many older working-class voters outside the southeast saw little to lose by voting for Brexit. They were deeply unhappy at the loss of community and the sort of secure, working-class jobs they had once enjoyed. The referendum gave them an opportunity to express their anger and frustration at a system which was not working for them.

**Conclusion**

Victor Seidler himself supported ‘Remain’ and he does not believe that the EU is the cause of the problems in areas which voted in favour of leaving the EU. Furthermore, he accepts that the referendum unleashed racist sentiment. However, he does argue that ‘We need to acknowledge the ease with which the poor and dispossessed have been ignored and their lives devalued,’ and that the concerns of these groups need to be taken much more seriously if anger and frustration are not to grow even stronger in a post-Brexit UK.

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**Questions**

1. Read the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report ‘Brexit vote explained: poverty, low skills and lack of opportunities’ at [www.tinyurl.com/jqxxqcau](http://www.tinyurl.com/jqxxqcau)
2. How far does this report support the claims of Victor Seidler?
3. What other social factors does it suggest were important in producing a majority in favour of ‘Leave’?
5. What reasons do the ‘Leave’ voters give for their decision? Were the reasons given by more affluent voters the same as those given by poorer voters?